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PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT: THE ART OF CALLIGRAPHY EXERCISES (*SIYĀH MASHQ*) IN IRAN

Calligraphy is concealed in the teaching method of the master; its essence is in its frequent repetition, and it exists to serve Islam.¹

These words by ‘Ali b. Abi Talib, traditionally regarded as the first master calligrapher of Islam, lie at the heart of *siyāh mashq*, or calligraphic exercise pages. *Siyāh mashq* pages have yielded some of the most visually stunning examples of later Persian calligraphy. Their bold forms and harmonious compositions are truly captivating. Yet this art form and its historical development have received little attention from scholars and art historians. Thus, in this study, I focus exclusively on the development of *siyāh mashq* in Iran: its visual and aesthetic characteristics, its role in the transmission of skills from master calligraphers to their pupils, and its spiritual dimensions as presented in the primary sources of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I also examine the evolution of *siyāh mashq* into an independent art form and its subsequent flowering in the nineteenth century, as well as its relevance in modern and contemporary Iranian art.

Siyāh mashq, literally “black writing,” refers to the calligraphic preparatory practice sheets executed by traditional calligraphers and scribes (fig. 1).² An integral part of the system through which calligraphers moved from apprenticeship to master status, the copying and repeating of individual letters or combinations of letters were intended to strengthen the hand and instill the concentration and discipline necessary to become a master calligrapher (fig. 2).

The late-fifteenth-century calligrapher Sultan ‘Ali Mashhadi aptly describes the objectives of and processes involved in calligraphic practice:

Whatever writing you wish to copy (*naql*), try not to hammer the iron when it is cold. Be very patient over each letter and not just cast a glance and proceed carelessly. Look at the “strength and weakness” of the letters, and put before your eyes the shape (*tarkīb*). Watch their “ascent” and “descent” rather than being distracted by this or that. Be aware of the flourish [?] (*shamr*) of the

letters, so that it be clear, clean, and attractive. When your writing has made progress, seat yourself in a corner and do not idle about; find some small manuscript of good style and hold it before your eyes. In the same format, ruling, and kind of writing, prepare yourself to copy it. After that, write several letters; do not indulge in egotism. Try not to be careless with regard to your copy, not even a little bit. One must give full attention to the copy, completing one line [of it] after another.³

Practice allowed the calligrapher to determine the size of the script to be used, to try out the pen, to judge whether or not the ink was of the correct consistency, and to map out the overall visual impact of the composition. It also enabled him to refine the shapes of the letters and overcome any unsteadiness or stiffness in the hand. This was achieved by the repetition of individual letters or groups of letters on different areas of the page. In order to use all available space on the sheet when practicing, the calligrapher often rotated the page several times (figs. 3 and 4). The typical result was a heavily worked, dark sheet with little white ground showing through. The process is analogous to a painter executing sketches before starting on the final version of a painting. Thus, according to master calligrapher Mohamed Zakariya, “Close observation of *mashq* can, at times, tell us more about the art of calligraphy than a formal, highly finished piece.”⁴

These practice sheets were not confined to the Persianate realm, but are also found in the Western Islamic world and Ottoman Turkey. In Arabic they are called *musawwada* (blackened), while in Turkish they are referred to as *karalama*, a verbal noun from the Turkish *kara* (black). Furthermore, *siyāh mashq* were not limited to one particular script but are found in a wide array of them. In Iran, those in the *nasta‘līq* (“hanging”) and *shikasta* (“broken”) scripts are found in greater numbers, due in part to the popularity of these two scripts at the time *siyāh mashq* emerged as an art form, as well as to their distinct visual attributes, which perfectly suited the compositional requirements of *siyāh mashq*. Such attributes included the unique



Fig. 1. The calligrapher's implements: reed pen, ink, inkwell, and a page of *mashq*. (After M. Uğur Derman, *Letters in Gold: Ottoman Calligraphy from the Sakıp Sabancı Collection, Istanbul* [New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998], fig. 7)

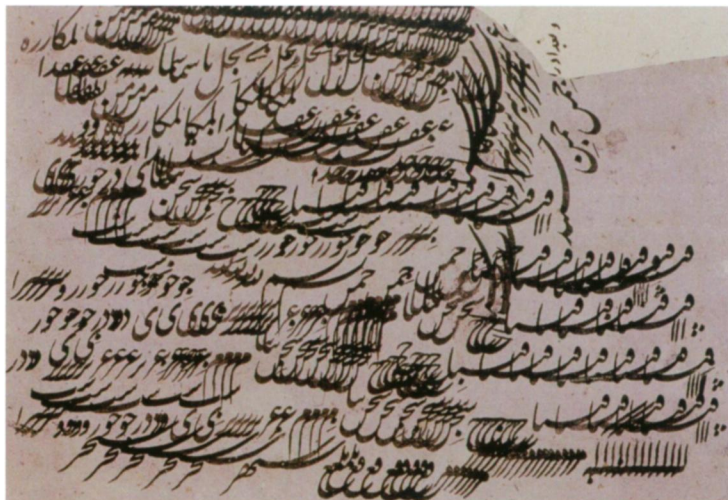


Fig. 2. Page of *mashq* by Muhammad Riza Kalhur. 11.4 x 19.1 cm. Private collection, Tehran.



Fig. 3. Page of *siyāh mashq* in *nasta'liq* script by Mir 'Imad. 16 x 25.5 cm. Collection of Haj Atiqi, Tehran.

balance between the thickness and thinness of the individual letters and the flexibility of these scripts to move freely above and beyond the base line.

Mashq is, of course, integral to teaching calligraphy. Teaching was usually done one-on-one, teacher to student, or in very small groups. The teacher or master would write the *sar mashq* (model) while the student watched. The student would practice the *mashq*, and then take it to the teacher for correction and advice. He would cover page after page, or wooden slate (*lawḥa*) after wooden slate, with *mashq*, which either had to be discarded once both sides of the paper were entirely covered or washed off again and again from the slate.⁵ The student would then move on to learning how to form words and lines by studying and writing compound exercises. After these were successfully

completed, the master issued the student a license (*ijāza*) authorizing him to work as a professional scribe or master.⁶ This process took anywhere from three to ten years. In Iran, in contrast to the Ottoman Empire, there was no tradition of producing *ijāzas* as finished works of art with elaborate illumination and fine calligraphy. Thus hardly any Persian *ijāzas* survive, creating an obstacle to their study.⁷

It is widely held that the thirteenth-century calligrapher, Yaqut al-Musta'simi (d. 1298) was instrumental in codifying the six major scripts of Arabic calligraphy. A number of *mufradāt* albums said to be in his hand remain. *Mufradāt* (elements), which were a beginning calligrapher's first group of lessons, consisting of single letters and then letters in pairs, were intended to teach control, proportion, and shape and are characterized by their simple horizontal and linear formats. In a page from a *mufradāt* album in *muḥaqqaq* script by Yaqut (fig. 5), the top panel consists of a single line showing the Arabic letter *sīn* in combination with seven other letters in alphabetical sequence. The panel below shows the letter *jīm* in combination with other letters, also in alphabetical sequence. The script is surrounded by gold cloud-forms on a red-hatched ground and is framed by a decorative border, which was probably added at a later date. *Mufradāt* albums such as this one give physical form to a chain of transmission from master to student, which stretches from earliest times to the present.⁸ Such pages were occasionally illuminated and included in albums (fig. 6). These were compiled by masters who were at the height of their careers, implying that calligraphers, no matter how advanced or well known, considered themselves to be in a continual process of learning. Thus accomplished masters would sign their album pages using expressions like *sawwada* (made a rough copy), *mashaqahu* (copied or practiced it), *raqamah* (wrote it with correct vocalization), *harrarah* (composed it), *naqala* (copied, implying interpretation), or *nammaqa* (copied out or wrote elegantly), rather than simply *kataba* (wrote); most calligraphers were only allowed to use these terms after they had received their license to practice (*ijāza*) from a master. These albums thus testify to both the skill of the master and his continual search for perfection.⁹

The symbiotic relationship between mysticism and calligraphy has been examined extensively by scholars, most notably Annemarie Schimmel. Many calligraphers were also devout Sufis for whom the very act of performing *mashq* was equivalent to contemplat-



Fig. 4. Page of *siyāh mashq* by Mir ‘Imad, Qazvin, before 1599–1600. 20.7 x 28.3 cm. Nasser D Khalili Collection, London, cal. 266. (Courtesy of the Nasser D Khalili Collection)

ing divine beauty. According to the late-sixteenth-century master calligrapher and poet Baba Shah Isfahani, *mashq* is a contemplative practice and a vehicle through which the luminous sparks of the real beloved’s beauty appear in the scribe’s vision.¹⁰ True mystical concentration is at the heart of performing *mashq*. This undivided focus is akin to the mesmerizing meditation of the Sufi mystics as they repeat the name of God in the *zīkr*, or remembrance ceremony, and the rhythmic repetition of the letters on the page is a visual analogue to the mystics’ metrical reiteration of the name of God.

SIYĀH MASHQ IN PRIMARY SOURCES OF THE SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES

We find a wealth of information about *siyāh mashq* in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century treatises on calligraphy and painting and in album prefaces. These

sources enable us to understand such works more fully and place them within their cultural and historical contexts.

In his treatise *Adab al-Mashq*, Baba Shah Isfahani¹¹ discusses at length the spiritual commitment, discipline, and rigor required in performing *mashq*. He states that there are three levels of competence in calligraphic practice.¹² All stages are equally important, and each must be mastered in sequence. The first is “visual *mashq*” (*mashq-i nazārī*), in which the apprentice studies the master’s writing and observes its spiritual characteristics. The second is pen practice (*mashq-i qalamī*), which entails copying from a master’s writing. The student begins by copying isolated letters (*mufradāt*) or words in the master’s hand, so that he understands the form of every letter in the style in which it was written. After that, he may be assigned short compositions. In *mashq-i qalamī* it is of utmost importance that the student pay no attention to writing that is in conflict with the model to be copied.



Fig. 5. Page from a *mufradāt* album by Yaqut Musta‘simi, Baghdad, thirteenth century. Upper part 16.8 x 24.9 cm., lower part 27.8 x 36.7 cm. Nasser D Khalili Collection, London, cal. 126, cal. 53. (Courtesy of the Nasser D Khalili Collection)



Fig. 6. Page of *mufradāt* in *muhaqqaq* script, sixteenth century. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper. 35.4 x 23.3 cm. Hossein Afshar Collection, London.

The apprentice must contemplate the elements of the master’s model seeking help in concentration (*himmat*) from the departed spirits of the masters of calligraphy. This takes at least one year. Finally, it is possible to attempt the third stage, “imaginative practice” (*mashq-i khayālī*), for a day or two at a time. “Imaginative practice” goes beyond mere copying and requires that the calligrapher use his imagination as the backdrop against which the forms of beauty appear. In “imaginative practice” the scribe uses the power of his own nature exclusively to write every composition that appears to him. The advantage of this type of practice is that it makes the scribe a master of spontaneity (*tasarruf*).

Sultan ‘Ali Mashhadi, Baba Shah’s master, gives the following instructions about the appropriate manner of copying the work of a master:

Collect the writings of masters;
Throw a glance at this and at that.
For whomever you feel a natural attraction,
Besides his writing, you must not look at others
So that your eye should become saturated with his writing
And because of his writing each of your letters should
become like a pearl.¹³

He adds that single-minded devotion, sacrifice, and the suppression of all other (worldly) desires are essential to achieve the inner discipline necessary for a scribe, and he advises young calligraphers to abandon peace and sleep, even from their tender years.¹⁴ His younger compatriot Mir ‘Ali Haravi also stresses the importance of hard work and complete dedication:

...The tip of calligraphy’s tresses did not easily come in my hand. If one sits leisurely for a moment without practicing, calligraphy goes from his hand like the color of henna.¹⁵

Practice is thus a selfless, painstaking, and highly structured process that requires extraordinary discipline and lies at the very core of the master-pupil relationship.

Fine penmanship was considered a prerequisite to and a symbol of refinement for princes and cultured courtiers associated with the Timurid court, and executing *mashq* became an occasional princely social pastime. One example of *mashq* (fig. 7) by the early-fifteenth-century Timurid prince Baysunghur and his companions reflects the central role calligraphy played in Timurid cultural and social life. Here, the Arabic proverb “Through gratitude, favors continue” was cop-



Fig. 7. Practice page by Baysunghur b. Shahrugh and companions, Herat, 1430. 67.9 x 49.8 cm. Topkapı Saray Library, H. 2152, fol. 31b. (Courtesy of the Topkapı Saray Library, Istanbul)

ied by Ahmad al-Rumi in *riqāʿ* script, then repeated by Baysunghur and thirteen others, including members of the royal workshop and the prince's personal companions. Each writer signed and circled his name at the end of the proverb. Although we are not sure of the purpose of the page, scholars have suggested that it may have been no more than a simple contest in manual dexterity or possibly a souvenir of a convivial social gathering, or *majlis*.¹⁶ According to David Roxburgh, the work demonstrates how calligraphers gathered to meditate on a model and how their imitation of it produced differing degrees of relation to it. Manipulations of balance between successive letter shapes, the situation of the letters on the line, and the

positioning of diacriticals offered avenues for individual expression. Subtle modifications and deviations show how calligraphers were able to move beyond a model. The *mashq* also illustrates the collaborative nature of artistic patronage at the time. The range of ethnic and professional backgrounds of the calligraphers represented here—painter, poet, paper cutter—demonstrates the artistic prowess, inclusiveness, and versatility of the Timurid princely workshop.¹⁷

THE BEGINNINGS OF *SIYĀH MASHQ* AS AN ART FORM

In the sixteenth century, examples of *siyāh mashq* acquired an added dimension as they began to attract the attention of patrons and lovers of art and culture, who perceived them as collectible items.¹⁸ Produced as individual pages, or *qitʿas*, intended for inclusion—along with paintings, drawings, and finely penned verses of poetry—in royal or non-royal albums, *siyāh mashq* pages, which were now often signed and sometimes dated, were regarded for the first time as works of art rather than mere exercises. The gradual evolution of the *siyāh mashq* from a practical tool into an independent art form in its own right also required that the sheets have a finished look. Thus many were lavishly illuminated and set into elaborate borders for inclusion in albums, the compilers of which made every effort to embellish them in accordance with each album's distinct aesthetic (fig. 8).

The first extant “artistic” *siyāh mashq* pages were produced by the late-sixteenth-century master of *nastaʿlīq* script, Mir ʿImad Hasani (d. 1615). *Siyāh mashq* as an art form was introduced in Iran only after Mir ʿImad made a trip to the Ottoman Empire in 1594–95 and encountered the Ottoman art of *karalama* (literally “black scribbings,” the Turkish equivalent of *mashq*) in the provincial cities of Damascus, Aleppo, and Baghdad (figs. 9 and 10). Before this, *siyāh mashq* in Iran had served only a practical purpose.¹⁹

Turkish *karalama* have a distinct musical quality. The letters can be interpreted as the visual manifestations of musical notes flowing into infinity, with intermeshing and superimposed lines.²⁰ Ottoman calligraphers signed, illuminated, and saved their *karalama*, recognizing them as independent art works long before their Persian counterparts accorded the same status to *siyāh mashq*.

In addition to Mir ʿImad's trip to the Ottoman



Fig. 8. *Siyāh mashq* page by Mir 'Imad, possibly Isfahan, 1555–56, with border by Muhammad Hadi. 21.1 x 37.1 cm. From the St. Petersburg *muraqqa'*. (Courtesy of the Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg)

Empire, what appears to have served as a catalyst for the transformation of the meaning and function of *siyāh mashq* in late-sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Iran was a more general shift in taste among patrons of art and a broadening of the patronage base.²¹ Artists grew increasingly independent from royal patronage, and changing economic conditions along with the immigration of artists to India and the Ottoman Empire led to the decline of manuscript painting and the ascendancy of single-page paintings, drawings, and calligraphy.²² Furthermore, when 'Abbas I succeeded to the throne in 1587, the Qizilbash nobility, who had set up their own libraries in the provinces, came to dominate the patronage of the arts of the book that had traditionally been centered at the

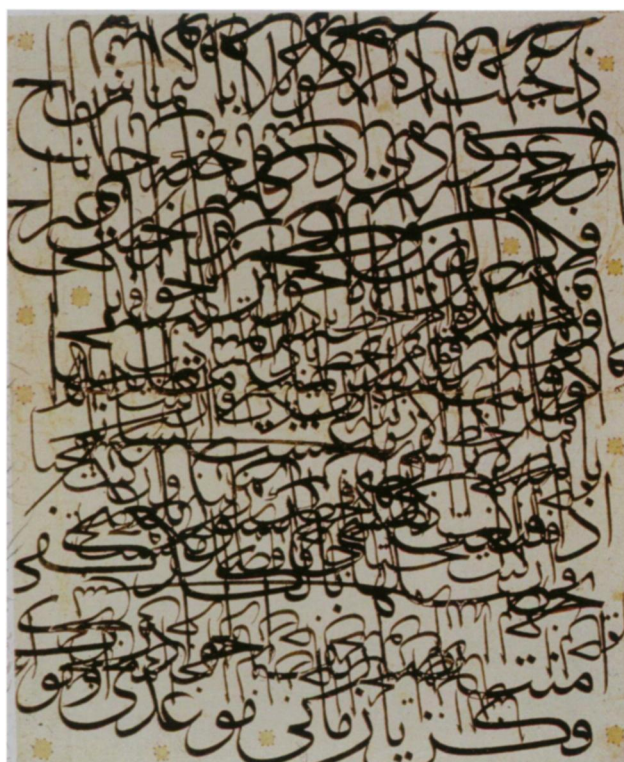


Fig. 9. Page of *karalama*, Turkey. (Courtesy of the collection of *P Art and Culture Magazine*)

royal court. Although some artists remained in Qazvin, many gravitated towards the provinces, where they found ready support among the Qizilbash. For example, Farhad Khan Qaramanlu, the governor of Azarbaijan and later of Fars, was a leading Qizilbash patron whose workshop and library included the celebrated calligraphers Mir 'Imad and 'Ali Reza 'Abbasi.²³ The role of the *ghulāms*, or converted Christian slaves, in the patronage of single-page paintings, drawings, and calligraphy also deserves attention.²⁴ The emergence of a new class of patron who could afford to buy individual pages prompted artists and calligraphers to adjust to the needs and requirements of this clientele. It is likely that the rise and proliferation of single-page art works gave impetus to the introduction of *siyāh mashq* into the sphere of commodity. Arbiters of taste now viewed these pages as aesthetic equals of, and welcome additions to, the repertoire of individual paintings, drawings, and calligraphic specimens already present in albums, or as objects worthy of being owned and exchanged.



Fig. 10. Page of *karalama*, Turkey, eighteenth century. Ink and gold on paper with marbled border. 20.32 x 15.24 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, bequest of Edwin Binney, 3rd, Turkish Collection, AC1995.124.8. (Courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art)

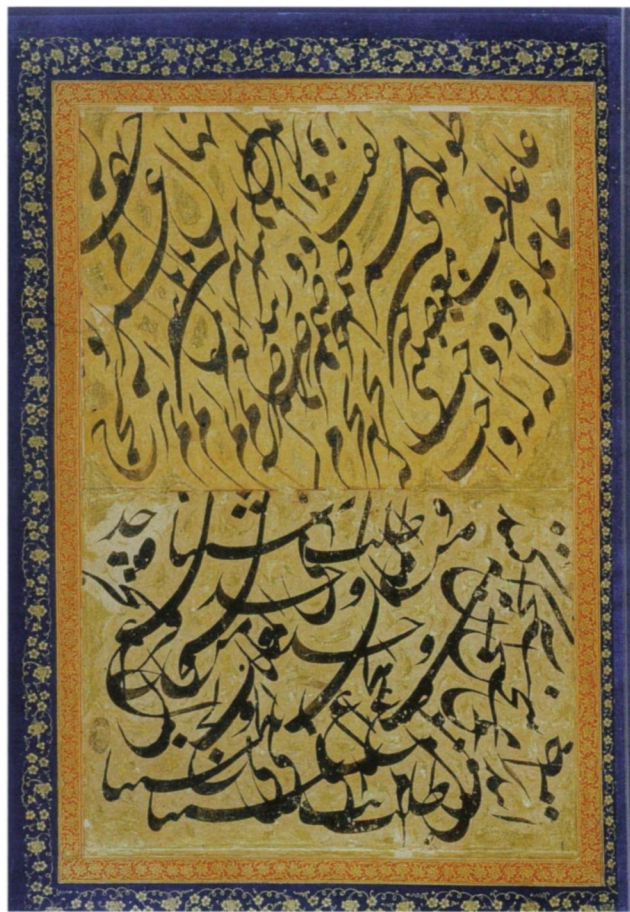


Fig. 11. *Siyāh mashq* page by Mir 'Imad, possibly Isfahan. 23.4 x 36.3 cm. From the St. Petersburg *muraqqa'*, fol. 74v. (Courtesy of the Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg)

In the eighteenth century, a group of *siyāh mashq* pages by Mir 'Imad was incorporated into a famous album, now in the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg (figs. 11 and 12), that consists of Persian and Indian paintings, drawings, and calligraphic pages dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. In color and style, the illuminated borders of the *siyāh mashq* pages visually complement those of the other folios in the album. The beauty of the *mashq* pages in this album lies in the purity of the letters and the balance and clarity of the compositions, even in cases when they are heavily worked. The arrangement and repetition of letters create a sense of rhythm as they appear on the page. Letters overlap or appear upside-down; in fact, many of these pages can be viewed from any direction and do not follow a linear sequence with a beginning and end. Thus they can be appreciated as much by a small gathering of people grouped around them as by a single person.

As seen in these pages, the technique and form

of *siyāh mashq* triumph over content, the text having either negligible meaning or none whatsoever. These works have a strikingly abstract quality; the bold forms of the individual letters and their arrangement on the page are what provide the medium of communication between calligrapher and viewer. In many cases, the dots over or under letters are omitted, so as not to distract from the letters' shapes. These examples of *siyāh mashq* are the calligrapher's most candid and personal artistic expression and represent his direct presence or imprint on the page as he wrestles with perfecting the forms and shapes of the letters and experiments with new compositional elements. They represent a union between the calligrapher and his work and can be viewed as the embodiment of his very



Fig. 12. *Siyāh mashq* page by Mir 'Imad, late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. 23.4 x 36.3 cm. From the St. Petersburg *muraqqa'*, fol. 97v. (Courtesy of the Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg)

moral essence. These finished works of art are closest to what Baba Shah Isfahani called *mashq-i khayālī* or imaginative *mashq*, whereby the calligrapher uses his imagination as his primary tool. Spontaneity and intuition are the distinguishing attributes of *mashq-i khayālī*. Here, the calligrapher pushes the boundaries of the canon while still working within it, creating a tour de force of calligraphy. These pages do not follow any particular set of compositional rules but reflect the whim and spiritual needs of the calligrapher at a given time. As masterpieces of improvisation, they require the viewer to penetrate beyond letters or words to essence, which distinguishes them as works of art of a high aesthetic caliber.

THE REEMERGENCE AND PROLIFERATION OF SIYĀH MASHQ IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

After a hiatus of about a century, the art of *siyāh mashq* reemerged in Iran in the early 1800s.²⁵ One of its most avid practitioners was Fath ‘Ali Shah, the second ruler of the Qajar dynasty (1785–1925). Like many rulers and princes, Fath ‘Ali Shah (r. 1789–1834) was trained in calligraphy as a youth and later became a practitioner of notable ability, choosing as his model the calligraphy of the sixteenth-century master of *nasta‘līq* Mir ‘Imad.

In one example of his work (fig. 13), the shah has repeatedly penned a single line (the text of which he himself may have composed), “My reed pen shames Jupiter and Mercury,” and then signed his name. The shah obviously considers himself a scribe of note, since Jupiter (*Birjīs*) is the lord of the planets and Mercury (*Tīr*) the scribe of the heavens.²⁶

There are several other extant pages of *mashq* by Fath ‘Ali Shah, all of which follow a similar format of a single line in *nasta‘līq* script repeated several times, surrounded and set off by an almost identical style of fine illumination. (While the calligraphy is in the shah’s hand, it is highly unlikely that the illumination is his.) In a second example (fig. 14), the repeated line reads, “This is the product of the pen of the King of the Times.”²⁷ Members of the shah’s sprawling court, such as ‘Abbas Nuri (d. 1839), the secretary of the army, also produced *mashq* pages of high quality in the style of Mir ‘Imad (fig. 15).

The mid- and late nineteenth century witnessed a further surge in the popularity of this art form. Finished *siyāh mashq* pages were produced in unprec-

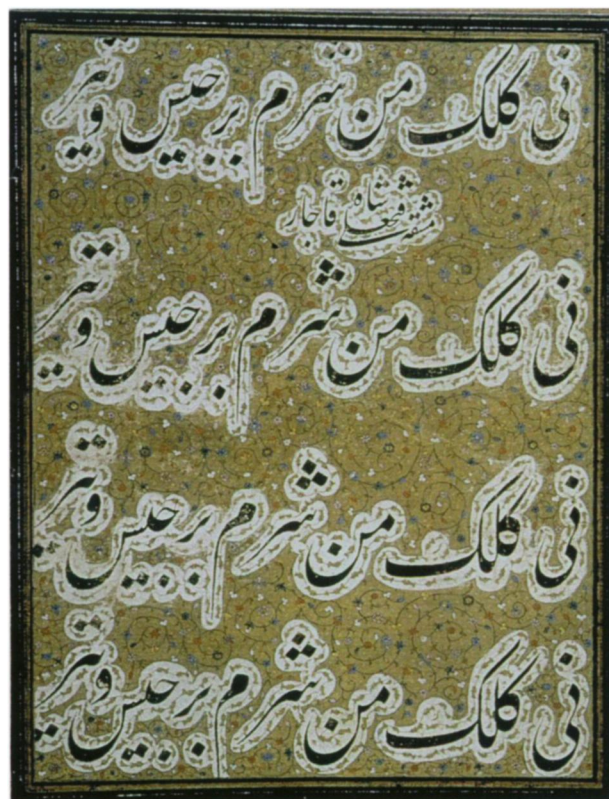


Fig. 13. Page of artistic *mashq* by Fath ‘Ali Shah Qajar, first half of the nineteenth century. 25.4 x 19 cm. Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2005. 01 [CAL012-290], formerly in the collection of Prince and Princess Sadruddin Aga Khan. (© Aga Khan Trust for Culture)

edented numbers and were circulated not only in courtly circles but also in lower echelons of society. These works were prized to such an extent that Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar (the fourth Qajar ruler, r. 1848–96) produced *mashq* pages for his court officials and ministers as gifts of gratitude, or *pīshkash*, for services rendered.²⁸ Such pages, often referred to as “*dast-khatt-i humāyūn*” or “specimens in His Majesty’s hand,” offered his most esteemed court officials tangible imprints of the shah: by giving them *mashq* pages, he was giving them “pieces of himself” to keep and cherish, a practice akin to bestowing robes he had already worn (*tanpūsh*) or autographed pictures of himself.

These gifts of royal calligraphy were reportedly distributed with great pomp and ceremony. In his travel journal, Jakob Polak, Nasir al-Din Shah’s Austrian court physician, reported that, conversely, when an official fell from grace the shah asked him to return his calli-

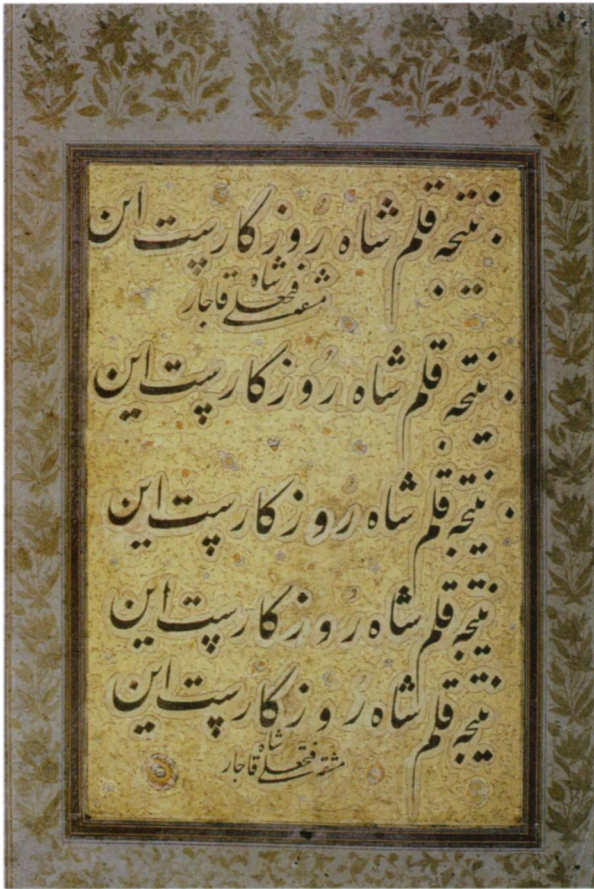


Fig. 14. Page of artistic *mashq* by Fath 'Ali Shah Qajar, first half of the nineteenth century. Private collection.

graphic specimens.²⁹ The shah is also said to have kept a close record of such “exchanges.” He penned two *mashq* pages based on the theme of love and friendship, one in *shikasta* and the other in *nasta'liq*, specifically as Nawruz (New Year) gifts for his court treasurer and master of the mint, Dust 'Ali Khan Mu'ayyir al-Mamalik (figs. 16, 17). In each one, the repetition of strokes makes for a pleasing and melodious composition. Both pages have richly illuminated borders crowned with painted images of Nasir al-Din Shah's imperial seal. In the *mashq* in *nasta'liq* script, the shah expresses the hope that the piece will be kept and cherished by his court treasurer.

The shah is also known to have sent illuminated pages of calligraphy as diplomatic gifts to foreign rulers. This practice is exemplified in a fine and elaborate page containing a poem in *nasta'liq* signed by the

eminent late-Qajar calligrapher, Muhammad Husayn Katib al-Sultan, which the shah sent to the Ottoman ambassador on the occasion of the birth of his son, 'Ali (fig 18).³⁰

During this period, however, the calligrapher most responsible for reinvigorating artistic *mashq*, or *mashq-i tafannunī*, and popularizing it beyond court circles was Mirza Ghulam Riza Isfahani (1829–86), known as Khushnivi (figs. 19 and 20). A master of *nasta'liq* in the style of Mir 'Imad, he dedicated much of his life to training young calligraphers and members of the royal household, in particular the son and grandsons of Nasir al-Din Shah's court treasurer, Dust 'Ali Khan. A first-hand account by the grandson of Dust 'Ali Khan (the above-mentioned recipient of Nasir al-Din Shah's Nawruz greetings) provides a close glimpse of Mirza Ghulam Riza's practices and working habits.³¹

The following story from this account vividly illustrates the multifaceted role of fine calligraphy in Qajar elite circles. Shortly after entering the household of Dust 'Ali Khan, Mirza Ghulam Riza was imprisoned for his alleged involvement in Babi activities.³² While in prison, he spent his time tirelessly practicing calligraphy and managed to produce a number of fine pages, which he sent to Dust 'Ali Khan. In an effort to secure Ghulam Riza's pardon, Dust 'Ali Khan took one of these pages to the shah. Himself a lover of calligraphy and a calligrapher of note, the shah was so impressed with the page that he ordered that the prisoner be released immediately. After that, Ghulam Riza lived in the household of Dust 'Ali Khan until almost the end of his life, training his sons and grandsons. According to this account, when performing *mashq* Ghulam Riza would go into a trance, covering every piece of paper in sight with exercises. The trance was apparently so deep and intense that it took him a while to return to a normal state. He is also known to have frequently gone without sleep for nights so that he could perform *mashq*. Mirza Ghulam Riza is said to have produced more *mashq* pages in his lifetime than finished pages of calligraphy.

During the late Qajar period, many prominent calligraphers produced *mashq* pages and single-page calligraphies as demand for them increased. The sheer number of extant examples serves as evidence for this proliferation. Like other single-page calligraphies, *mashq* pages were often created for commemorative purposes and given as gifts at births, major holidays, and official occasions and following military victories and diplo-



Fig. 15. *Siyāh mashq* page by ‘Abbas Nuri, Fath ‘Ali Shah’s secretary to the army, Tehran, dated 1246 (1830). 24 x 37 cm. Haj Atiqi Collection, Tehran.

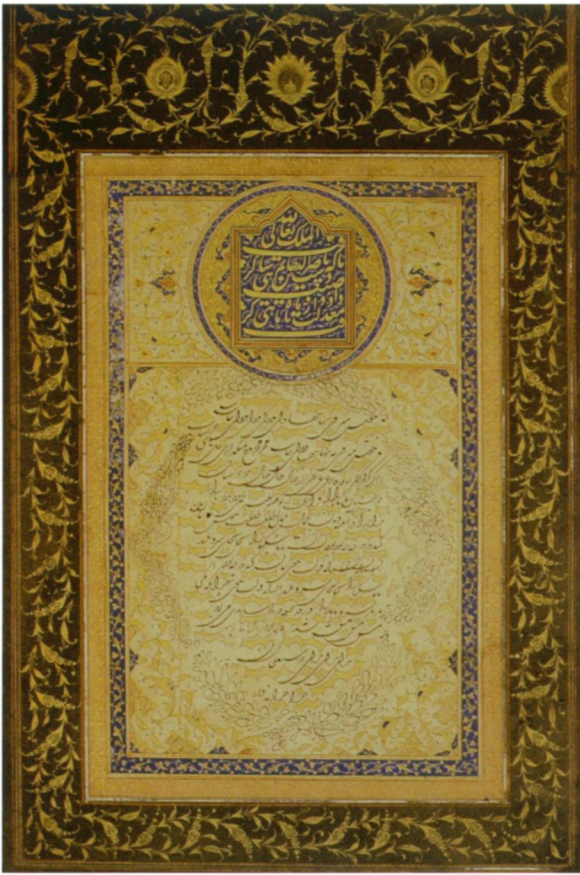


Fig. 16. Page of *siyāh mashq* in *shikasta* script by Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar, Tehran, dated Jumada II 1271 (February–March 1855). 35.8 x 23.3 cm. Nasser D Khalili Collection, London, cal. 421. (Courtesy of the Nasser D. Khalili Collection)



Fig. 17. Page of *siyāh mashq* in *nasta'liq* script by Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar, Tehran, dated to March 21, 1855. 35.7 x 25 cm. Nasser D Khalili Collection, London, mss. 819. (Courtesy of the Nasser D Khalili Collection)

matic meetings. Numerous extant signed or unsigned pages of *siyāh mashq* by renowned calligraphers such as the aforementioned Mirza Ghulam Riza, members of the Vesal family of Shiraz (fig. 21), Asadollah Shirazi (d. 1889) (fig. 22), Muhammad Riza Kalhur (1829–92) (fig. 23), Muhammad Kazim (d. 1916), Darvish 'Abd al-Majid Taleqani (1737–72), Mirza Kuchak Khan (d. 1813), Muhammad Husayn, known as 'Imad al-Kuttab (d. 1886), and 'Ali Akbar Gulistaneh (1857–1901) (fig. 24) attest to the popularity of the art form at this time. It is not certain, however, whether these pages were directly commissioned or made as luxury objects for future sale to interested individuals; probably both forms of production were prevalent.

When studied closely, most artistic *siyāh mashq* dem-

onstrate a lineage back to such great masters of calligraphy as Mir 'Ali Haravi, Mir 'Imad al-Hasani, Ahmad Nayrizi, and Darvish 'Abd al-Majid Taleqani. In fact, *mashq* pages by Mir 'Imad were so valued in the second half of the nineteenth century that they were professionally photographed and used as models (*sar mashq*) for training aspiring calligraphers.³³ The mechanical duplication of the originals through photography made them available to a greater number of aspiring calligraphers.

A page of calligraphy in *nasta'liq* by Mir 'Imad was photographed at the request of Nasir al-Din Shah by the court photographer, 'Abdallah Qajar, at the Dar al-Funun (Polytechnic College) in Tehran in the 1860s (fig. 25). The approximately 252 calligraphy pages

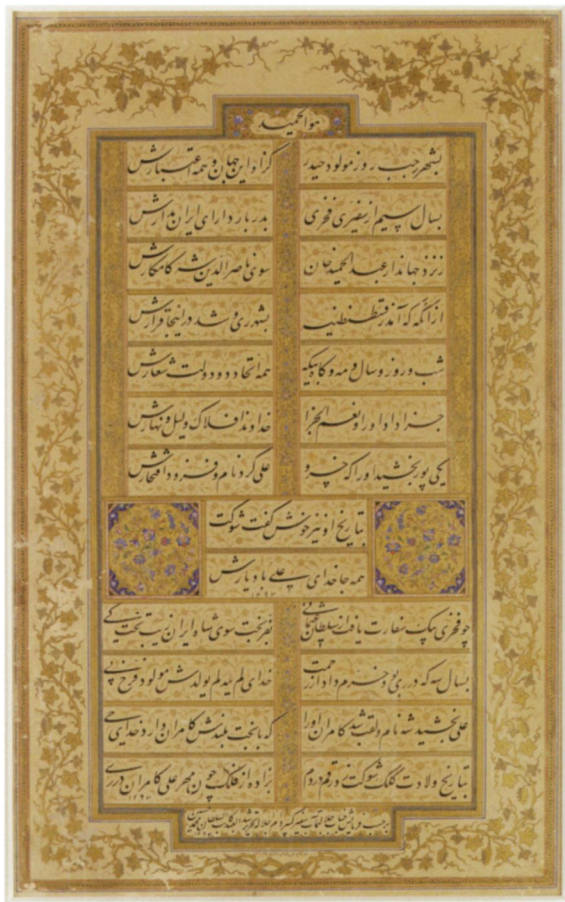


Fig. 18. Page of calligraphy by Muhammad Husayn, 1297 (1880), sent by Nasir al-Din Shah to the Ottoman ambassador on the occasion of the birth of the ambassador's son 'Ali. 32 x 19.5 cm. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, lent by the Art and History Trust Collection, LTS1995.2.125. (Courtesy of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC)

by Mir 'Imad in the St. Petersburg album were also reportedly photographed at the request of Nasir al-Din Shah. These photographs were collected by lovers of calligraphy; often given illuminated borders, they were included in photograph albums (*muraqqa' khattī*), enjoyed individually, or exchanged as gifts.³⁴

The rise in popularity of *siyāh mashq* in the nineteenth century was in part due to the Qajar kings themselves and to the active role of the court as the arbiter of taste. Kings, princes, and statesmen not only collected *siyāh mashq* pages but also executed and distributed them as official gifts; others followed suit. By virtue of their spontaneity, these pages were per-



Fig. 19. Page of *siyāh mashq* in *nasta'liq* script by Ghulam Riza Isfahani, Tehran, 1870–71. 38 x 24.6 cm. Nasser D Khalili Collection, London. (Courtesy of the Nasser D Khalili Collection)

ceived as treasured gifts and collectibles of the most personal and intimate nature. Inscriptions on them suggest that their exchange was considered a gesture of deepest friendship and loyalty.

The demand for these pages was not limited to the ruling elite of the late nineteenth century but also extended to those more casually connected to the sprawling Qajar court. No longer just a courtly prerogative, these works were now available on the market and sought after by interested individuals. Nasir al-Din Shah's court physician, Jakob Polak, commented that pages by celebrated calligraphers were in great demand, and that cultured collectors who were able to distinguish the hand of a noted master were willing to pay handsomely to purchase such works, fram-



Fig. 20. Portrait of Mirza Ghulam Riza Isfahani seated next to one of his *siyāh mashq* pages, painted by Kaykhusraw Khoroush, 1989. Watercolor on paper, 30.5 x 22.9 cm. Private Collection, Tehran. (Courtesy of Sina Goudarzi, Minneapolis, MN)

ing and hanging them on the walls of their homes.³⁵ Polak adds that foreigners also admired and collected these works. Although he does not mention artistic *siyāh mashq* specifically, his observation serves as evidence of the popularity of single-page calligraphies in general.

Studying the history of *siyāh mashq* reveals its transition from a practical tool for aspiring and master calligraphers to an artistic means of representing the sure hand and spiritual commitment of a recognized calligrapher like Mir ‘Imad, and, finally, to a commodity valued as a collectible object or potential gift. Such a study raises questions regarding the reasons for the various permutations in the meaning and function of this art form through time. Theories set forth by contemporary social anthropologists such as Arjun Appa-

durai and Igor Kopytoff aid the understanding of the specific trajectory of *siyāh mashq* and its development. In his book, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Appadurai argues that the meaning that people attribute to objects derives from human transactions and motivations, particularly from how those objects are used and circulated.³⁶ Focusing on the culturally defined dimensions of exchange and circulation, his theory illuminates the way in which people find value in objects and objects give value to social relations. Objects are made somewhere; they often do something; some move from place to place; their meaning and function change in different contexts. Value is never inherent in an object and is determined in a process of exchange and desirability. Objects have “ages” or periods in their lives; their uses change with time. “Fashion” and “taste” are among the dominant forces responsible for endowing something with value and making it desirable and worthy of exchange.³⁷

Other explanations for the increase in production and proliferation of *siyāh mashq* pages during this period may be related to the process of modernization. In the nineteenth century, Iran became a pawn in the hands of the two superpowers, Western Europe and Russia. Threatened by constant foreign intervention and encroachment on its borders, the country was forced to experiment with notions of modernity in order to protect itself. The wide array of Western innovations introduced into Iran at this time included photography and lithography, both technologies of duplication that had a lasting impact on the arts. One may ask whether the presence of methods of mechanical reproduction created new expectations among patrons, and whether the general desire for quantity and quick reproduction created greater demand. Were *siyāh mashq* pages considered less labor-intensive economic commodities that could be produced fairly rapidly in quantity for a large clientele? If so, had the original objectives of *siyāh mashq* been compromised? These are questions whose answers can only be partial and lie within the realm of speculation.

THE LEGACY OF THE ART OF SIYĀH MASHQ

Aside from issues of commodification, further questions arise regarding the extent to which *siyāh mashq* influenced the development of later Persian callig-



Fig. 21. Page of *mashq* by Muhammad Shafi' Vesal, Shiraz, dated 1258 (1842). Private collection, Tehran.

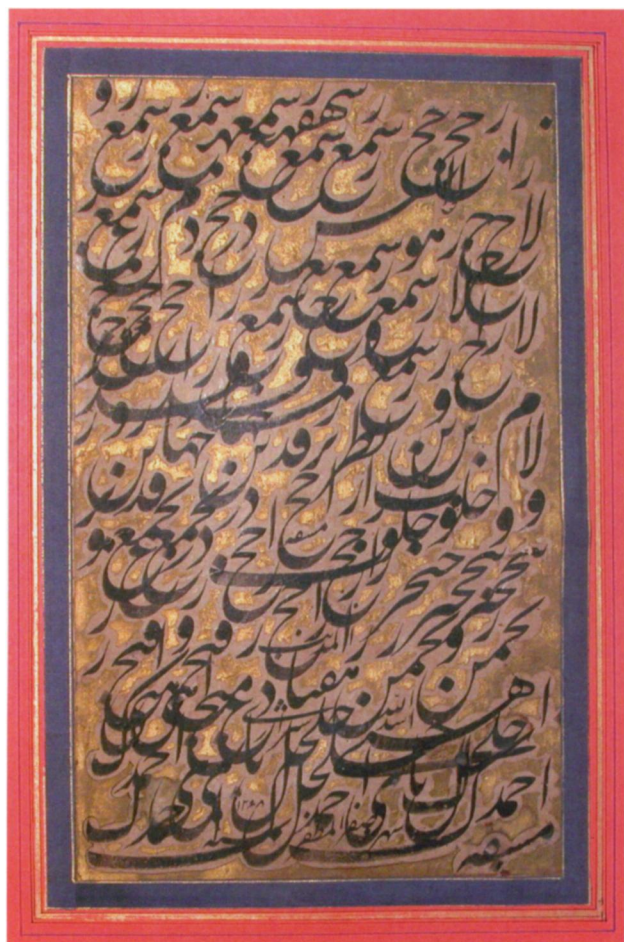


Fig. 22. Page of *mashq* by Assadollah Shirazi, Tehran, dated 1268 (1851). 28.6 x 19.7 cm. Private collection, New York.

raphy. Did any new scripts emerge as a result of the prevalence of this art form? Did it give rise to specific innovations in Persian calligraphy or contribute to the standardization of existing conventions? My research has led me to believe that the art of *siyāh mashq* did in fact make a lasting mark on later Persian calligraphy by reinforcing the idea of irregularity as a prized feature. Traditionally, regularity was one of the calligrapher's prime objectives. Calligraphic specimens generally followed linear formats, whether horizontal, vertical, or diagonal; compositions were highly structured, systematic, and sometimes compartmentalized; and letters rarely overlapped or appeared upside-down or at different angles.

I propose that *siyāh mashq* influenced the compo-

sitional quality of later calligraphy, particularly that of *shikasta* script, which was developed in Iran in the seventeenth century and reached its peak in the eighteenth and nineteenth. This script had little currency beyond the borders of Iran and was created to fill a need for quick and efficient yet beautiful writing that would be used primarily for private correspondence and administrative documents. Although the art of *siyāh mashq* may not have affected the shapes of the letters in *shikasta*, it certainly influenced the compositional characteristics of the script, in which horizontal regularity is not the norm; instead, words fluidly rise and fall, emphasizing delicate grace, movement, and artistic whim. Three examples reproduced here (figs. 24, 26, and 27) illustrate this: the first is a *siyāh mashq* composition by the master of *shikasta* 'Ali Akbar Gulistaneh, while the second and third are documents written by Mirza Kuchak Khan and 'Abd al-Majid Taliqani (d. 1771), both clearly exhibiting a taste for the irregular and erratic.

Siyāh mashq may also have given impetus to the popularization of other conventions of irregularity, such as reverse writing, or *vārūna-nivīsi* (fig. 28); bilateral writing (fig. 29), in which one has to rotate the page completely in order to read the text; the use of an unprecedented range of unusual colored inks and papers; and the calligraphic representations of humans and animals—all of which reflect the fact that forward-looking Iranian calligraphers were taking extraordinary liberties and constantly going beyond the boundaries of traditional canons.

Siyāh mashq is a living art. Today, traditional calligraphers, most of whom reside in Iran, regularly produce artistic *mashq* pages along with other kinds of finished calligraphy. *Mashq* pages are regarded with esteem equal to if not greater than that in which they were held in the nineteenth century and earlier. Contemporary calligraphers working in the traditional mode, such as Ghulam Husayn Amirkhani (b. 1939), 'Ali Akbar Kaveh (b. 1894), Kaykhusraw Khoroush (b. 1942), Jalil Rasuli (b. 1941), and Muhammad Ehsa'i (b. 1939), all graduates of the Anjuman-i Khushnvisan (Center for Calligraphic Arts) in Tehran, have worked for decades to keep the art of calligraphy alive in Iran, training numerous students in the traditional canon. The enrollment in the Anjuman, currently more than 400 students per year, serves as evidence of the vital spirit of calligraphy and its popularity among the younger generations in Iran. According to students



Fig. 23. Page of *mashq* by Muhammad Riza Kalhur, undated. 13.5 x 21 cm. 'Ali Jamasb Collection, Tehran



Fig. 24. Page of *siyāh mashq* in *shikasta* script by 'Ali Akbar Gulistaneh, late nineteenth century. Approx. 12 x 7.6 cm. Gulistan Library Collection, Tehran.

of the Anjuman, young calligraphers so cherished the *sar mashq* of their masters that during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war they buried many of these specimens in the ground for fear that they might be damaged in the bombings.³⁸

Parallels to this art form also exist in modern and contemporary Iranian art. Iranian artists have continuously drawn inspiration from their rich artistic heritage, particularly calligraphy (fig. 30). As pioneers of modernism in the 1960s and 1970s, such artists as Hossein Zenderoudi (b. 1937) (figs. 31 and 32), Parviz Tanavoli (b. 1937), and the above-mentioned Mohammad Ehsa'i (fig. 33) celebrate the versatile shapes and forms of the letters of the Arabic alphabet. In their works, often referred to as *naqqashī khatt*, the letters are transformed beyond recognition and are reduced to pure forms. As in the *siyāh mashq* pages, the calligraphy in these works is abstract and largely devoid of literal meaning. The compositions are rhythmic and appear in kaleidoscopic colors in a variety of techniques including oil on canvas, a medium not traditionally used for calligraphy. The letters float weightlessly or appear superimposed in layers of rich texture on the surface of the canvas. In "Ayn + 'Ayn" by Hossein Zenderoudi (fig. 32), the painter repeats ad infinitum, in horizontal rows, the wide loop of the body of the letter 'ayn. The work captures the way calligraphers manipulate the reed pen as they struggle to produce the desired shape and thickness of the letter. The result is a rhythmic composition with sharp contrast between the black and brown "ink" and the exposed canvas.

The work of Mohammad Ehsa'i, active since the 1970s, also explores the pure forms of the letters of the alphabet. Ehsa'i is a calligrapher trained in the traditional mode; his paintings "create compositions that look to the future, as well as to past tradition."³⁹ In his "*Mijmar-i Gulvāzhahā*" ("Sunburst of Flowering Words") (fig. 33), the bodies of the letters are closely intertwined like the warp and weft of a carpet, forming a circle that culminates at the center and has an undefined outer border.

Likewise, Poursan Jinchi, a New York-based Iranian artist, alludes to *siyāh mashq* in her use of letters in *nasta'liq* script as her preferred means of expression. With the precision and sure-handed discipline of the traditional calligrapher, she renders these letters on a background of heavily incised markings and scribbles, creating richly textured compositions (fig. 34). She transforms the letters until they are beyond rec-



Fig. 25. Photograph by 'Abdullah Qajar of a *mashq* by Mir 'Imad, Tehran, 1860s. Private collection, London.



Fig. 26. Document in *shikasta* script by Mirza Kuchak Khan, dated 1210 (1795–96). 16.8 x 9.9 cm. Harvard University Art Museums, Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Gift of John Goelet, 1958.212. (Courtesy of Harvard University Art Museums)

ognition by an ingenious method of layering and juxtaposing forms and colors. Her complete immersion in the artistic process is revealed in the way she writes, rewrites, layers, inscribes, etches, and engraves the letters and markings on the surface of the canvas, deconstructing the verses and words she uses: breaking them down, reducing them, and subsequently (re)presenting them in a remarkably innovative way. In addition, Jinchi has the ability to create her calligraphic compositions in sizes ranging from miniature to monumental.

Looking at the trajectory of *siyāh mashq* and its various permutations throughout history, we see a new art form emerge and develop, an art form increas-



Fig. 27. Document in *shikasta* script by 'Abd al-Majid Taliqani (d. 1771), Mir 'Imad Museum, Tehran.

ingly prized for its aesthetic and compositional attributes. Artistic *siyāh mashq* demonstrates the calligrapher's need and desire to supersede the canon by improvising (*gurīz*) and allowing his or her spirit to roam more freely on the page. These works of art, both traditional and contemporary, stand as testimony to the ingenuity of Iranian calligraphers and artists, and to the versatility and visual appeal of the letters of the Arabic alphabet and the endless possibilities they offer.

NOTES

1. From Nabil F. Safwat, with a contribution by Mohamed Zakariya, *The Art of the Pen: Calligraphy of the 14th to the 20th Century*, The Nasser D Khalili Collection of Islamic Art, vol. 5. (London: Nour Foundation in assoc. with Azimuth Editions and Oxford University Press, 1996), 12.

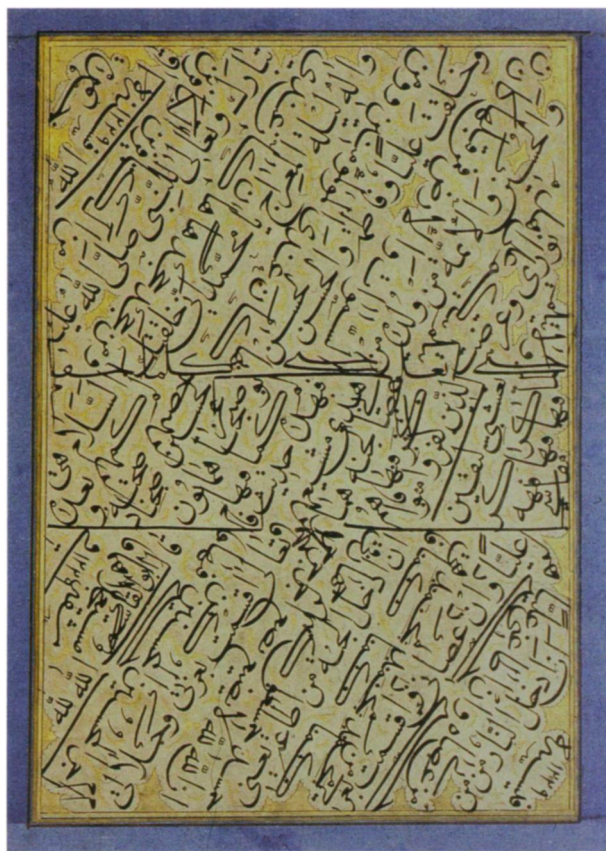


Fig. 28. Composition in *naskh* by Abu 'l Qasim Shirazi, dated 1229 (1813–14). 30.3 x 20.7 cm. Nasser D Khalili Collection, cal. 218.1. (Courtesy of the Nasser D Khalili Collection)

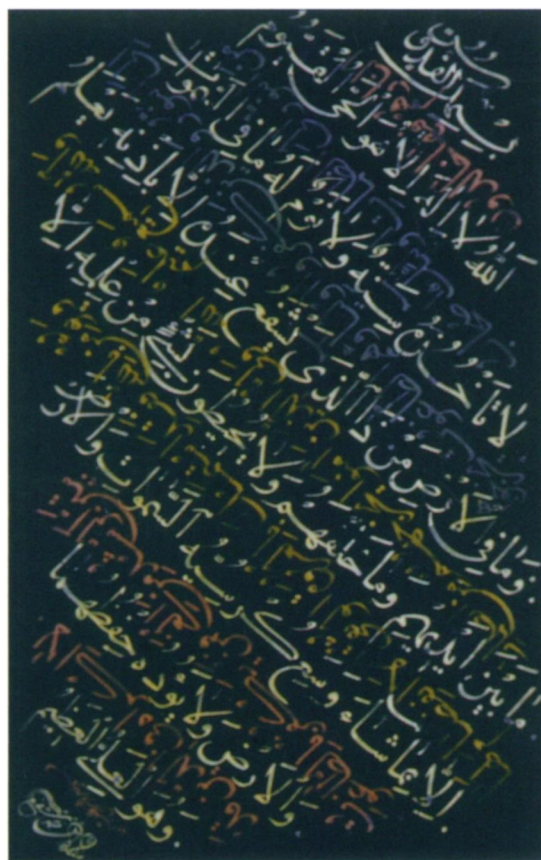


Fig. 29. Excerpts from the Qur'an by Muhammad Shafi', known as Vesal-i Shirazi, ca. 1840. 23 x 14 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1979.518.6 (Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art)

2. Some calligraphers make the distinction between *siyāh mashq* and *mashq-i siyāh*, using *siyāh mashq* to designate artistic *mashq*, and *mashq-i siyāh* to refer to *mashq* executed solely for practice.
3. This translation is a revision of Ahmad b. Mīr Munshī al-Husaynī, *Calligraphers and Painters: A Treatise of Qāḍī Ahmad, Son of Mīr-Munshī, circa A.H. 1015/A.D. 1606*, trans. Vladimir Minorsky, Smithsonian Institution, Freer Gallery of Art Occasional Papers, vol. 3, no. 2 (Washington, DC, 1959), 118.
4. Mohamed Zakariya, *Zakariya Calligraphy: A Note about Content*, www.zakariya.net/
5. Calligraphers commonly practiced on paper or on wooden slates. When entirely covered, the slates were washed and reused, since the ink employed was soluble in water: see Schimmel, *Calligraphy and Islamic Culture*, 42.
6. An *ijāza* is a license to practice, which would allow a pupil to teach. A pupil often had to complete a presentation piece of several lines in order to earn the *ijāza*.
7. For examples of *ijāzas*, see M. Uğur Derman, *Letters in Gold: Ottoman Calligraphy from the Sakıp Sabancı Collection, Istanbul* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998); Muhammad 'Alī Karīmzāda Tabrizī, *Ijāzat nāmeḥ = Icāzet name: The Most Unique and Precious Document in Ottoman Calligraphy* (London, 1999); see also Safwat, *Art of the Pen*, 40–44.
8. Safwat, *Art of the Pen*, 13.
9. Ibid., 40.
10. Carl Ernst, "The Spirit of Islamic Calligraphy: Baba Shah Isfahani's *Adab al-Mashq*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 112 (1992): 279–86.
11. This treatise has been attributed by some scholars to Mīr 'Imād Hasanī.
12. This discussion has been drawn from Ernst's translation of *Adab al-Mashq* in "The Spirit of Islamic Calligraphy." The manuscript used by Ernst, written in Baba Shah Isfahani's hand, is in the library of Punjab University in Lahore.
13. Qāḍī Ahmad, *Calligraphers and Painters*, 117; see also Anthony Welch, *Calligraphy in the Arts of the Muslim World* (New York: Asia Society and Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 34.



Fig. 30. Page of *siyāh mashq* by Sina Goudarzi, Minneapolis, MN. Gouache on paper, 40.6 x 18.4 cm. (Courtesy of the artist)



Fig. 31. Hossein Zenderoudi, "Thorns and Roses," 1986. Dimensions unavailable. (After *Hafiz: Dance of Life* [Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 1988, 21])



Fig. 32. Hossein Zenderoudi, "Ayn + Ayn," 1970. Gouache on paper, 195 x 130 cm. Collection of Fereydoun Ave, Tehran.

14. Qāḍī Aḥmad, *Calligraphers and Painters*, 121–22; Welch, *Calligraphy*, 34.
15. Schimmel, *Calligraphy in Islamic Culture*, 38.
16. Thomas Lentz and Glenn Lowry, *Timur and the Princely Vision* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 113–15.
17. David Roxburgh, *The Persian Album, 1400–1600: From Dispersal to Collection* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 85–87.

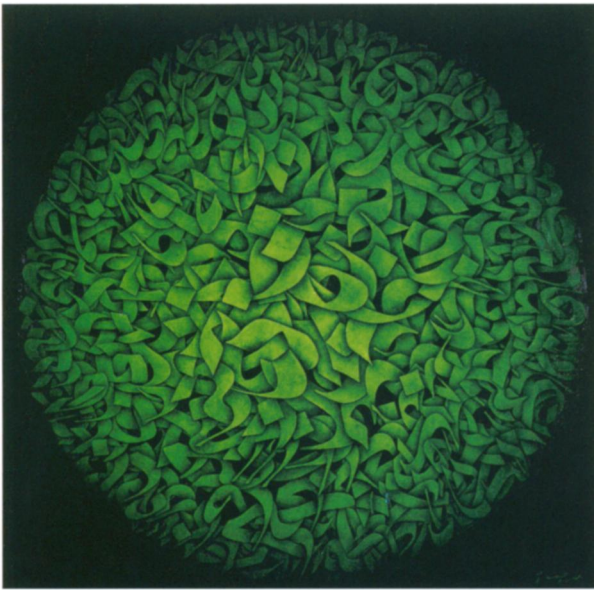


Fig. 33. Mohammad Ehsa'i, "Mijmar-i Gulvāzhahā." Oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm. (Courtesy of the artist)



Fig. 34. Calligraphic composition by Pouran Jinchi, 1999. Ink and acrylic on canvas, 27.9 x 35.6 cm. (Courtesy of the artist)

18. *Siyāh mashq* always remained the primary method of practice for experienced calligraphers as well as young and aspiring ones, even when it acquired different meanings.
19. The custom of adding practice sheets to albums existed in earlier historical periods, though these sheets were composed in a manner different from *siyāh mashq* and were not prized for their artistic and compositional attributes but rather intended to document part of a process. Examples date to as early as the time of Ja'far Tabrizi and continue to the sixteenth century, when calligraphers like Muhammad Mu'min copied out all the cursive scripts on a single page to show his dexterity in the canon. See Roxburgh, *Persian Album*, 200, 260.
20. Ferit Edgü, "The Music of Karalama," *P: Art, Culture, Antiques* 2 (Autumn–Winter 1999): 26–36
21. See Sussan Babaie, Kathryn Babayan, Ina Baghdiantz-McCabe, and Massumeh Farhad, *Slaves of the Shah: New Elites of Safavid Iran* (London, I. B. Tauris, 2004), chap. 5.
22. Anthony Welch, *Artists for the Shah: Late Sixteenth-Century Painting at the Imperial Court of Iran* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976) 1–16, 196–200.
23. Ibid., 174; Babaie et al., *Slaves of the Shah*, 114–16.
24. After Shah 'Abbas I replaced Qizilbash governors with slaves, or *ghulāms*, appointing them as governors of economically and strategically important provinces of Khurasan, these *ghulāms* began to play an important role in the patronage of the arts: see Babaie et al., *Slaves of the Shah*, 114.
25. Although the reasons for this hiatus are unclear, the waning production of *siyāh mashq* may have been a result of a decline in patronage and interest on the part of royal and non-royal patrons.
26. Welch, *Calligraphy*, 160–61.
27. For an example, see Christie's, London, *Islamic Art and Manuscripts* (Tues., 10 Oct., 2000), 81, lot 94: an album of calligraphy by Habibullah b. 'Abdullah Qajar, dated 7 Rabi' II, 1311/18 October, 1893, which opens with a calligraphic page in the hand of Nasir al-Din Shah endorsing the calligrapher's skill.
28. For more information on *pishkash*, see Ann Lambton, "Pishkash: Present or Tribute?," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 57, 1 (1994): 145–58. *Pishkash* was usually a gift from a subordinate to a king, governor, or member of the ruling elite. In the late Qajar period, the word came to be used more generically to refer to any official gift.
29. Jakob Eduard Polak, *Persien: Das Land und seine Bewohner* (orig. pub. Leipzig, 1865; Hildesheim and New York: George Olms Verlag, 1976), 284.
30. Aboulala Soudavar, *Art of the Persian Courts* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), fig. 163.
31. Muḥammad 'Ali Mu'ayyiri, "Mirzā Ghulām Rizā Īsfahānī, Qalamsalar-i Qalamraw-i Khatt," *Kilk* 80–83 (Nov. 1996–Feb. 1997): 241–59.
32. Ibid. Babism started in Shiraz in 1844, when Mirza 'Ali Muhammad, influenced by Shaykhi Shiite theology, which viewed the Twelve Imams as incarnations of the Divine, pro-

claimed himself the Bab (*bāb*), or gate to divine truth—a concept that clashed with the Islamic belief that Muhammad was the “Seal of the Prophets” (*khatam al-anbiyāʾ*). ‘Ali Muhammad sent missionaries throughout Iran, and in 1848 the movement declared its complete secession from Islam and all its rites. Upon the accession that year of Nasir al-Din Shah (r. 1848–96), the Bab’s followers rose in insurrection and were defeated. Many of the leaders were killed, and the Bab was executed at Tabriz in 1850. Persecutions continued throughout the 1860s, and after 1868 there occurred a schism, one group following the leader Mirza Husayn ‘Ali Nuri (known as Bahauallah), the originator of Bahaism, who

declared himself the Bab.

33. Karīmzāda Tabrīzī, *Ijāzat nāmeḥ*, 306.
34. Ibid., 138.
35. Polak, *Persien*, 266.
36. Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 33–35.
37. Ibid.
38. Story recounted by a calligraphy pupil training at the Anjuman-i Khushnivisan in Tehran during the Iran-Iraq war.
39. Rose Issa, *Iranian Contemporary Art* (London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2001).